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MEDIA ADVISORY

UNH Professor Available to Talk About Pope John Paul II

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March 2, 2005

Michele Dillon, associate professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, is available to discuss the implications of Pope John Paul II's latest illness on the Catholic Church and what the future could hold. She can be reached at (603) 862-2500 or michele.Dillon@unh.edu.

Dillon has written extensively on Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere, and has been especially interested in the institutional and cultural processes that enable Catholics who selectively disagree with aspects of Catholic teaching to remain loyal to Catholicism. She also has examined the political engagement of the Catholic Church, and of other churches and activist organizations in public moral debates in different western countries.

Pope John Paul's latest illness has reopened debate about whether popes should retire instead of reigning for life. The last pope to abdicate was Gregory XII, who stepped down in 1415. Currently, there is no mechanism in church law for removing a sitting pope, and no reason to believe that John Paul will retire. In fact, Dillon says, according to Catholic doctrine life is precious from the moment of conception to the moment of death, regardless of physical or mental incapacity.

"It's not like a job," she says. "This is sacramental service. Even if he is in physical distress, the Pope would not resign. You are pope until God intervenes, and he believes this is what he's supposed to be doing." Dillon also noted that even if the pope is physically or mentally unable to perform his duties, many of which are primarily symbolic, the Vatican is a vast bureaucracy similar to the American presidency, and there are many powerful Vatican offices doing the every day work of the church.

When the time comes to elect another pope, a conclave of cardinals will make the decision. "Catholicism is a transnational religion, but traditionally the power structure has been in Western Europe, particularly Italy because the Vatican is in Rome," Dillon says. Therefore, the election of John Paul from communist Poland in 1978 was considered radical in terms of both church and East-West history.

So, although the number of Catholics in Europe is on the decline, and Africa, South America and Asia have seen significant increases, Dillon says there is no reason to expect that will play a part in the decision.

“The history of the church is always changing,” she says. “Every pope brings his own personality style and theological interest, and the cardinals will be looking for a good moral leader.”

Dillon says she expects John Paul II will be remembered for supporting solidarity in Poland, which contributed greatly to the decline of communism and the end of the Cold War. She says he also is known for the great amount of global traveling he did. Among theologians, he is known for believing that to challenge the church’s teachings was to show disrespect.

“Within the church, some see the pope as a divisive figure,” she says. “He is very liberal politically, especially in regards to social justice and opposition to the death penalty and to war, but a theological conservative, opposed to gay rights, the ordination of women, and euthanasia. Some church scholars and ordinary Catholics alike are disappointed that his papacy also will be known for suppressing dialogue and conversation.”